



Tawassul and Istighatha: A Holistic Overview

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By Shaykh Haider Hobbollah

Translated by: Faisal H, Moussa al-Rufayie, Shayan

Question: I have a great deal of confusion regarding the issue of *tawassul* through the Prophet, his Ahl al-Bayt, and others. Can you clarify the difference of opinion in this issue for me? This topic has confused many of us, and there is much controversy around it in our country between different movements. Thank you. (Muhammad Amin, Baku, the Republic of Azerbaijan).

Answer: The issue of *tawassul* is one that, to me, still seems to be full of disorganisation in how it is examined, which has caused and continues to cause a number of things to be conflated among many people. This has led people to jump from one idea to another, despite the fact that there is no necessary connection between the two ideas. Given the plurality of divergent views on this issue, I shall mention my understanding of the fundamental roadmap for studying this topic. Through this, it may become evident that some have made methodological errors in their treatment and understanding of *tawassul*, as the details of the discussion shall clarify.

The issue of *tawassul* can be discussed under two fundamental axes:

The First Axis: The Concept and Meaning of *Tawassul*

Here, it is necessary to discuss two fundamental meanings of *tawassul*:

The first meaning:

Turning towards God (the Most High) in supplication, and requesting things from Him, but accompanied with '*by the right of Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad*' or '*by the right of the saints and the righteous*', and so on.

So you would say: "*O God – by the right of Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad – forgive my sin*" or "*O God – by the right of Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad and by the right of the righteous among your servants – bless me with your permissible and abundant sustenance*" and other similar expressions.

There is no dispute among the majority of the Muslims regarding the permissibility of this meaning of *tawassul*, and there are many texts among both sides (Sunnī and Shi'a) regarding it. Yes, there are reservations about this from some Salafi movements.

The second meaning: Turning towards the intermediary itself in supplication, which has two main forms:

The first form: Invoking the intermediary to supplicate to God for you. For example, by saying: "*O Muḥammad, supplicate to God, for me, that he provide me a righteous son*" or "*O Ḥusayn, supplicate to God, for me, that he bless me with martyrdom in His cause, as He has blessed you with it*". This is similar to what the sons of Jacob (a) did when they asked him to pray to God for their forgiveness, as is understood by their request and his answer as the Noble Qur'an told us in Sūra Yūsuf:

They begged, "O our father! Pray for the forgiveness of our sins. We have certainly been sinful." (12:97)

He said, "I will pray to my Lord for your forgiveness. He 'alone' is indeed the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (12:98)

The second form: Invoking the intermediary by itself to fulfil what you desire. For example, by saying: "*O Muḥammad, provide for me*" or "*O 'Alī, save me from the Fire*" and other similar expressions. Thus, if an individual falls ill, he is taken to the shrine of a prophet, a successor (*waṣī*), or a saint (*walī*), to turn towards this prophet, successor or saint and say: "*I have certainly come to you with my ill son, and I want you to cure him for me*" and many other examples.

This meaning has caused great conflict among Muslims. In my estimation, the centre of the dispute primarily has to be here—especially the dispute between non-Salafi Muslims. It is here, where the distinction appears between invoking the living and invoking the dead, and

between *istighātha* (seeking help) through the living and *istighātha* through the dead, which the two sects (Sunnī and Shīʿa) have discussed in detail in its relevant place.

The Second Axis: The Stance on Both Meanings of *Tawassul*

This must be considered on two levels:

The first level: The theological (*kalāmī*) level, meaning: is turning towards the prophet, or saint, or successor in supplication, *kufr* (disbelief) and *shirk* (association of partners with God) or not? And likewise for supplication to God by the right of this saint or prophet.

This is the well-known theological discussion in which conflict occurred between the Salafīs of the Sunnīs and the majority of Shīʿa, Ṣūfīs and other Muslims. In fact, before the time of Shaykh Ibn Taymīyya al-Ḥarrānī (d. 728), it was claimed that the people of Islām are in consensus that *tawassul* is not incompatible with faith.

On this level of the discussion, the issue is studied on more than one plane, the most prominent of which are the following:

1. The creedal theological plane. Does this *tawassul* mean that the proponent believes in the divinity (*ulūhīyya*) of the intermediary that he performs *tawassul* with or not? Does the proponent consider the intermediary to be independent [of God] in its influence or not? Those who perform *tawassul* say that they do not believe in the divinity of the intermediary, and nor do they consider the intermediary to be independent [of God] in its influence, whereas others may accuse them of believing in the divinity of the intermediary. Therefore this issue must be investigated. Does *tawassul*—especially in its second meaning of turning to someone other than God in supplication—conceal a belief in the divinity of something other than God or not? Here, it is appropriate to discuss the belief in the cosmological guardianship (*wilāya al-takwīnīyya*) of the Prophet, or successor, or mystic, or others, even after their death. Does this belief lead to *shirk* or not? And is there a suspicion of *shirk* in it or not? What is the evidence to prove that it is a belief of *shirk*, and what is the evidence to deny this also? In addition, it is appropriate to discuss life in the *Barzakh* here, and whether it is established or not, whether unrestrictedly for all people or for some specific people.

2. The practical theological plane. The intended meaning of this is whether this behaviour (*tawassul*) by itself – irrespective of the beliefs of the individual on a mental and intellectual level – is a behaviour of *shirk* or a behaviour of *tawḥīd* (monotheism), or a behaviour that contradicts *tawḥīd* (or a behaviour of *ghulūww*)?

Why did we distinguish between what we called the creedal theological dimension and the practical theological dimension, given that actions are from the affairs of the sciences of the Shari‘a, not from the affairs of the sciences of creed and theology?

The answer is that when the issue of *shirk* is raised between different Muslim movements, it takes a theoretical, doctrinal dimension, and a behavioural, practical dimension. That is because it is suggested here that whoever prays and prostrates to idols while believing they are not independent [of God] in influence, but turns away from God and directs his worship and prayer to the idols, is a *mushrik* according to the Qur’anic understanding. However, this is practical *shirk*, because *shirk* in worship is practical *shirk*. This means that this individual (committing practical *shirk*) does not consider someone other than God to have real independent influence on the world, but they make their devotional relationship centred around someone other than God (the Most High). Thus, this individual prays to the idol, fasts for the idol, makes vows for the idol, offers sacrifices to the idol; slaughters animals in the idol’s name instead of God’s name, takes oaths and swears by the idol’s name, and fears the anger of the idol too; they take the idol with themselves when travelling to protect them from danger and safeguard them from fear, wipe themselves with the idol to derive blessings and goodness from it, and—despite all this—they know that the idol and what it possesses is nothing except the possession (*mulk*) of God (the Most High). They (the Muslim movements) believe that the *shirk* of the Arabs of *Jāhiliyya* and the *mushrikīn* of Quraysh was only of this manner, and even if we were to examine the beliefs of the *mushrikīn* of our time, as is said about India and China, we would see that they believe in the One and Only God in theory, but their practical behaviour and approach to worship is *shirkī*. It is for this reason that the *Jāhiliyya* Arabs used to say, as the Holy Qur’ān reports:

“We worship them only so they may bring us closer to Allah” (39:3)

Therefore, God is the objective, and the idol is a means to reach this objective.

And the *Jāhiliyya* Arabs used to say this famous phrase during the *talbīya* of *Hajj*:

Here I am (*labbayka*), O God [in response to Your call], here I am. Here I am, You have no partner, **except for the partner who is Yours**, [whom] You possess and what he possesses.

Therefore, the idol is a partner of God but is owned by God, and all the power of the idol is under the power of God (the Most High).

As such, some of those who say that *tawassul* is *shirk* believe that every place in which *shirk* is practiced, is a place of *shirk*. Thus, the idols are a place of *shirk*, because the Arabs practiced *shirk* through their relationship with them, otherwise they are nothing but rocks.

Consequently, those who say *tawassul* is *shirk* apply this same law on the tombs and shrines of the prophets, Imāms and saints, and thus believe that it is obligatory to destroy them, due to the obligation of destroying places of *shirk*, as the Prophet (s) did in Makkah after the Conquest of Makkah, by destroying the places of *shirk* in the *Ka'ba*. In doing this, they believe they are performing an act similar to that of the Prophet.

This underlines the importance of theologically studying the concept of *tawḥīd* and *shirk* in the practical dimension (and the study of the history of *shirk* and its understanding in the life of the pre-Islamic Arabs), and not solely in the theoretical dimension of belief. This is one of the major mistakes that I have seen occur in dialogue between the advocates and opponents of *tawassul*. Some opponents of *tawassul* intend this meaning of *shirk*, whereas its advocates deny that *tawassul* is *shirk* in the sense of believing that the intermediary is independent of God in its influence. Therefore, they are between practical and theoretical *shirk*, and it is necessary to investigate this matter in this way to further clarify the situation. Here, we find that the advocates of *tawassul* may make several distinctions between their behaviour and the behaviour of the polytheistic Arabs. They believe that comparing their actions with the actions of the Arabs is a huge injustice and a far-fetched analogy. How can they be compared when they pray to God, make sacrifices to Him, perform acts of worship purely for His Noble Face, and prohibit prostration to other than Him and so on? Therefore, investigating this issue in an academic manner – far from sectarian and polemic conflict – is one of the most important necessities of researching *tawassul* and its relationship to *shirk* and *tawḥīd* in Islam.

Another important point also is the issue of seeking help (*isti'āna*), or *tawassul*, from other than God, especially from the dead, because the discussion and controversy often takes place here between those in dispute. One may use verse 5 of Sūra al-Fātiḥa, for example, to prove the obligation of limiting the seeking of help to God alone, while others may respond by saying that we all seek help from doctors, teachers, engineers and so on. I believe that the compass of discussion here should be guided in a different way by the two parties. That is, sometimes seeking help and *tawassul* are perceived as a phenomenon that is unrelated to a divine or religious aspect. Certainly, this is not what is intended by limiting seeking help to God alone, otherwise, the situation of the Muslims with the Prophet would have been different, and they would have stopped seeking help from anything around them. Rather, the centre of the idea of seeking help (*isti'āna*), relying upon (*tawakkul*), *tawassul*, and so on – I must summarise since there is little room – is that these phenomena become devotional or instances relating to other than God.

For example, you use (lit. seek help from) an idol to break some glass, and this is not the same as seeking help from the idol as a sacred, metaphysical and religious matter. You seek help from the teacher to study chemistry or mathematics, but this is different from seeking help from a stone as a divine, religious matter, such that your religious and sacred recourse to God depends on the stone. You request from the teacher to help you in understanding chemistry and mathematics. Therefore, the distinction between the two situations makes it easier to organise and tidy the discussion of this topic. I propose that this matter be made explicit, to first examine the non-sacred form of seeking help and then the sacred form – so to speak. I believe that the centre of the dispute is mostly whether it is correct or not to seek. I suggest thinking about this distinction, as it may solve some of the problems here, and save time for some of the researchers.

The second level: This is the legal (*sharʿī*) level, meaning: regardless of the theological question, and assuming we agree that both meanings and forms of *tawassul* do not contravene *tawḥīd*, then what is the position of the *Sharīʿa* on this conduct? Does it agree with it or reject it, or does it leave it to the individual, or is there a particular view regarding it?

At this level of the discussion, which is undertaken by jurisprudential, ethical, *ḥadīth* and Qurʾānic studies, the investigation must be split into two stages:

The First Stage

Discussing whether there is permission or not to do *tawassul*. Here, it must be investigated whether *tawassul* is prohibited, regardless of the topic of *shirk*. Is there evidence in the Book or Sunna that forbids this type of supplication or not? And is there evidence in the Book or Sunna that permits this type of supplication or not?

This is also what is predominantly discussed in researches that have taken place among Muslims – after excluding the topic of *shirk* – as those who believe that *tawassul* is permitted have tried to rely on a set of textual sources from the Qurʾān and Sunna to establish the permissibility of *tawassul* – sometimes in the sense of *tawassul* with the living, and sometimes in the sense of *tawassul* with the dead. The centre of the great battle between the conflicting sides lies here. I've mentioned the sources mentioning Jacob's children requesting that he seek forgiveness on their behalf; the sources mentioning the Prophet (s) seeking forgiveness on behalf of the Muslims; the Qurʾān mentioning seeking a means of nearness to God (*ibtighā al-wasīla*) (al-Māʾida: 35 and al-Isrā': 57); some of the Prophetic narrations, or at the time of the Prophet (s); or the early Islamic era regarding *tawassul* through *ḥadīth*, or at his grave or otherwise, such as the *ḥadīth* of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb asking al-

‘Abbas to pray for rain, and the *ḥadīth* of al-Ḍarīr, and the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet praying for Faṭīma b. Asad, and the *ḥadīth* of Adam’s (a) *tawassul* to Muḥammad (s), and the *ḥadīth* of ‘do *tawassul* by virtue of my status’, etc. Narrations that indicate the permissibility of *tawassul*—especially in the first meaning—are also mentioned, which are found in the *ḥadīth* sources among the Shī‘a.

Likewise, those who prohibit *tawassul* mention some evidences that they deem sound in transmission (ṣudūr) and meaning (dalāla), such as:

The places of worship are ‘only’ for Allah, so do not invoke anyone besides Him. (72:18)

In addition, they dispute the evidences of those who permit *tawassul* in both their chains and meaning, and they consider some of these evidences to be in their own favour, not the other way around, such as the *ḥadīth* of ‘Umar asking al-‘Abbas to pray for rain. They also have a completely different interpretation of the two verses of *wasīla* in the Holy Qur’ān, confining the *tawassul* that is permissible to *tawassul* through the Most Beautiful Names of God, through righteous deeds, and through the prayer of a living righteous man, etc.

The discussion in the fiqh of *tawassul* – at the level of permissibility and impermissibility – should have two sides in my opinion:

The first side: a singular individualistic view of the act of *tawassul*, in the sense that we consider if it is permissible for me to perform *tawassul* now through one of the prophets, but with my general conduct being to supplicate to God alone?

The second side: beyond the singular individualistic view, in the sense that we consider if it is permissible or not for the state of *tawassulī* supplication to become a general predominant culture, or equivalent to the culture of supplicating towards God directly?

There is a difference between these two sides of the issue. An action may be permissible if we look at it by itself, but it may be forbidden if it turns into a religious culture, from the point that it may become a religious innovation (*bid‘a*) (which is, according to some scholars, different to the concept of forbidden legislation). This issue is related to the theory of religious innovation in Islamic jurisprudence, and it is because of this that we find that some Muslim scholars permit something, but they do not permit it to become a custom. Thus, what we are discussing here is if the act of *tawassul* itself is permissible, but – when it is related to supplication, which is a religious issue – is it permissible for the *tawassulī* supplication to become a general religious phenomenon and a widespread popular culture such that it becomes equal to the culture of direct supplication to God or not?

The Second Stage

Discussing the motivation to do *tawassul* or the lack thereof, which comes after the saying that *tawassul* is permissible, even through the deceased, and that there is neither a creedal nor a legal problem in it, but rather it is permissible either with positive evidence or on the base principle of non-prohibition. What is meant by this stage is that we study whether the supplication directed to other than God is a type of supplication that is encouraged by the Islamic *Sharīʿa* and desired by the Ḥanīf religion or not? For it is not sufficient for *tawassul* to be legally permissible in order for us to claim that it is desirable in the religion. Rather, additional evidence must be established to prove that the religion has desired this type of supplication, because the evidence that permit something are different to the texts that encourage something.

This is a conflict within the movement that permits *tawassul*. Here, it is said: *tawassul* in the first sense we mentioned – a supplication to God by the right of x and y person – is desired in the *Sharīʿa*, due to the existence of many religious texts, numbering in the tens, regarding this on the level of *ḥadīth*.

As for the second type of *tawassul* — especially in its second form which is a supplication to the Prophet or the *walī* (specifically the dead) to fulfil your request — there is a difference of opinion.

One group believes that the narrations of this type of supplication are extremely few and rare. They affectionately challenge the other group to bring these narrations. They see them only as a very small handful, of which all or the overwhelming majority have weak chains, that prove the practice (as a habit and custom) or call to these types of *tawassulī* supplications.

Whereas, we find that all, or the overwhelming majority, of supplications mentioned in the Qurʾān and noble Sunna among all the *madhāhib* —hundreds of verses and narrations — direct the human to turn towards God with supplication. So how is it possible, by the logic of reason, to abandon all this vast culture of supplications that lead us towards God, even if by the right of x and y person, and cling onto some extremely few narrations with weak chains — in fact, some are doubtful to be narrations in the first place, and some appeared in later centuries — to claim that the basis of supplication in Islam is *tawassulī* in this meaning of *tawassul*, or to claim that Islam desires such *tawassulī* supplication?! How can this be correct?!

And stranger than this, how is it possible to base popular culture on *tawassulī* supplication, in of *tawassul*, despite the fact that the apparent understanding of the Qurʾān and hundreds of texts (Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya, al-ʿAlawīyya, al-Ṣādiqīyya etc) is that the

desire was set to establish a popular culture on the supplication literature of directly turning towards God, exalted is He?

This is in addition to discussions about the connection of the two verses of *wasīla* to the issue of supplication, even if the verses are connected to the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt. Their connection to the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt—as reported by some narrations—does not mean that the two verses are connected to the issue of supplication that we are discussing, unless there is specific evidence for this. Otherwise, if the Qur’anic commandment to take the *wasīla* included supplication, it would be necessary to believe in the obligation of *tawassul*, not its permissibility alone. So how is it that hundreds of supplications in the texts were established contrary to this obligation?!

This is the fundamental conflict within the supporters of *tawassul* themselves, especially in the Imāmī madhhab.

Therefore, it becomes apparent:

1. Kalāmī argument is not sufficient to establish the permissibility or prohibition of *tawassul*. Rather, it is necessary to reopen a jurisprudential investigation that is also far from the issue of *tawhīd* and *shirk*.
2. Proving individual or collective permissibility for *tawassul* is not sufficient to promote a culture of *tawassul* and consider it a religious approach. Rather, it is necessary to compare and approach the totality of supplicatory texts in the Qur’ān and the Sunna, to find out which ways of supplication are the most desirable in the religion and which are merely permissible. Accordingly, just because there is no evidence for the prohibition of *tawassul* does not mean that the *Sharī’a* desires *tawassul* and makes it a religious slogan, so pay careful attention because these headings have overlapped a lot in the minds of some people.
3. Let us assume that *tawassul* is prohibited as a result of *Sharī’a* evidence, but this alone is not sufficient to prove that it is *shirk*, because the *shirk* of something cannot be established based just on the prohibition of an action, nor even merely on the assumption that it is a religious innovation in your view. Likewise, a distinction should be made between the concepts of visiting graves and *tawassul*, for a person may visit a grave and consider it recommended, but he does not do *tawassul* neither through the grave nor its resident, in fact he may consider it to be prohibited. Completely like someone who goes to visit the grave of the Prophet (upon him and his family be peace), or his mosque, or Makkah, without believing in the act of turning to these issues. Rather, they are there turning to God, while also sending greetings (salām) to the Prophet in his grave, for sending

greetings upon him is different from *tawassul*, even if it is invalid in your view. Pay attention to these issues and be careful not to conflate things.

4. It is necessary to precisely distinguish between the first and second meaning of *tawassul*. Many people conflate the meanings together, and the greatest conflict pertains to the second meaning, especially in its second and final form.

5. I believe — and this is a jurisprudential discussion which we may come to one day, and I had examined it in my discussion about the meaning of *kufr* in the Holy Qur'ān, and in my *tafsīr* lessons on Sūra al-Mā'ūn—that we need to make a distinction between the concept of *shirk* and the concept of the *mushrik*, and similarly the concept of *kufr* and the *kāfir*. Similarly, we need to distinguish between *kufr*, *shirk*, *īmān* and Islam with regard to the legal criteria for religious affiliation that enters a person into Islam and the Muslim community and removes them from it, and between these same titles but in the general religious criteria. An act of *shirk* may arise from a person from your point of view, but this does not necessarily dictate that a person is a *mushrik* who is subject to the rulings of *shirk* and *kufr* in Islamic jurisprudence. Consequently, we find in the *ḥadīth* expressions such as '*The one who abandons the prayer is a kāfir*' but what is intended is not *kufr* in the jurisprudential sense. This reveals that *kufr* and *shirk* are relatively uncertain, and that a specific degree of them is what gives expression to the title of *mushrik* and *kāfir* in the jurisprudential criteria, which entails legal impact. For this reason, the Prophet (s) considered many of those who are not classified as Muslims by *takfīrī* groups today as Muslims in the legal sense of belonging to the community, even if they committed acts of *kufr* by abandoning the prayer or even by *nifāq*.

Therefore, I find that some Muslims, who jump from the idea of an act of *shirk* to the idea of a jurisprudential *mushrik*, quickly judge people to be apostates. They fell into a huge mistake in understanding the religious texts when they considered them all to be in connection with expressing a legal and jurisprudential issue. This is why you find them believing that anyone who abandons *jihād* is an apostate, and whoever does not judge by what God has revealed is an apostate, and then they believe that fighting the apostate takes precedence over a *kāfir*. Thus, the criteria change a lot among them, and in my opinion this is a major *ijtihādī* error in understanding the totality of the religious texts in this regard. This was, in my humble opinion, due to the projection of legal jurisprudential terminology on the linguistic uses of these terms in the Qur'ān and Sunna. Hopefully time will allow us to expand on this important idea, which can also explain many of the texts which some Shī'a in turn have used to establish the *kufr* of their opponents. Many recent scholars have noted this and pointed it in different wording. Therefore, it would be correct to describe me as a *kāfir* if I

abandoned prayer, but this does not mean I have left Islam in the jurisprudential and legal sense.

This is a brief snapshot of a preliminary roadmap when examining the topic of *tawassul*, with the omission of some other details. I hope it will be beneficial, God willing.



Shayan

Shayan is an MPhil student in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, interested in Islamic thought, theology and intellectual history.

Theology

- < Kumayt's Panegyric
- > Imam al-Hadi's Poem in the Court of Mutawakkil

About Author



Shayan

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